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SUBJECT: BABIL'S POLITICS HEADING TOWARD ELECTIONS: CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

REF: BAGHDAD 0028

CLASSIFIED BY: Kenneth Hillas, Team Leader, Babil PRT, Dept of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. Summary. (C) Babil's political landscape is sure to change after the elections, but the scope may be less than some opposition politicians seek. ISCI's dominant position is sure to be weakened, but it may not be broken altogether. Dawa may assume a greater political role in the province, if only through superior alliance building with other parties. The previous ISCI/Da'wa partnership is defunct and not likely to continue in the next Provincial Council (PC). The reasons extend beyond the current electoral contest -- Dawa seeking to supplant ISCI as the dominant political force and both parties competing for the Shia religious vote -- and are based in competing visions of Iraq's future. Da'wa is aiming to convert growing ties with OMS into a partnership in the new PC. Although ISCI still believes it can win the election, it clearly stands the most to lose. Whether ISCI is prepared to accept an electoral loss or diminution of its political power in the province will influence the risk of violence and intimidation after the election. With one or two exceptions, threats or acts of violence against candidates have so far not been a feature of the election campaign, but the period of greatest risk could be after the election. Most candidate express confidence in the Iraq High Election Commissions (IHEC) local Governorate Elections Office (GEO) Director, who is viewed as relatively fair and impartial, notwithstanding apparent links to Dawa. End Summary.

Da'wa

¶2. (C) Dawa's goals in the PC election are ambitious. Provincial party chair Abu Ahmed al-Basri sees Da'wa winning 10 of 30 PC seats, while Deputy Party Chair Dr. Neama jassim says seven to eight. Under either scenario Dawa would probably be the largest party in the PC and in a position to play a leading role in electing a new Governor and PC Chair. Al-Basri has spent most of the last year distancing Dawa from ISCI and the current Governor, while reaching out to other political entities. The previous Dawa/ISCI partnership that ran the province after 2005 had effectively lapsed by the start of the current election campaign. The reasons for this, however, transcend electoral politics, and there is little Dawa interest in replicating the previous power-sharing arrangement with ISCI. The electoral rivalry is real, as Dawa seeks to supplant ISCI as the provincial power-broker and both parties compete for the support of the same constituency -- the Shia religious voter. But Dawa has a different vision for Iraq (rejecting regionalism) and is far more prepared to build partnerships with secular parties, such as the communists, independents and even the Sadrist Trend. Abu Ahmed Al-Basri, who has close ties to PM Maliki, rejects the possibility that the Marja'iyah could force ISCI and Dawa to work together to run the province.

¶3. (C) The current Governor, Salim Salah Al-Muslimawi, does not meet the educational requirements under the new provincial powers law. An open Governorship just adds to the scope of political change that may flow from the January 31 election. The current Governor is widely viewed as corrupt, uneducated and

incompetent. His photos are largely absent from the many posters festooning Hillah and other Babil towns, even though he tops the ISCI ticket. Leading candidates to be elected Governor include Al-Basri and former Governor Iskandr Witwit. Al Basri himself says he would prefer to have a Dawa-friendly technocrat fill the position, and then removing him after two years if the incumbent is not successful. Al-Basri's ambivalence about becoming Governor is no doubt influenced by the perceived political drag the current incumbent has had on ISCI.

ISCI/Badr

¶4. (C) ISCI and its Badr militia still believe they will win the election. In a December 15 meeting, Deputy Badr Chief Hassan Hamza Al-Tayi'e virtually identified Badr as an arm of the state. For many ISCI/Badr officials, it is hard to imagine losing power. By contrast, there is a broad expectation among other political parties that ISCI will be weakened by the PC election, if it does not find itself replaced altogether by a Dawa-led coalition. Many of ISCI's rivals fear, however, that it will not freely give up power if it loses. For this reason, the risk of violence may actually be greater after the January 31, if ISCI/Badr decides to coerce or kill newly elected PC members in an effort to extend its hold on provincial power. ISCI's electoral strategy has been to effectively run against itself, fielding at least six slates of independents with no formal ties to ISCI, even as ISCI nests itself inside a seven-party coalition, Shaheed al-Mirab. ISCI campaign seeks to tap into the Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim's aura of leadership, but his illness does not reinforce an image of strength.

¶5. (C) How ISCI responds to the prospective loss of power will shape the risk of political violence after the election. Given its influence over the Governor and the IP, Iran could influence ISCI behavior in such a scenario. It is not clear to many Babil politicians, especially Da'wa's leadership, whether Iran will constrain or encourage ISCI/Badr to engage in violence in an effort to remedy an electoral defeat. Al-Basri's hope -- and it may not be much more than that -- is that Iran would accommodate itself to a Da'wa-dominated provincial government. Potentially the risk of political violence could be greater right after the election, if ISCI believes intimidation could help it retain its power.

Sadrist Trend

¶6. (C) The elections will occur at a time of ferment within OMS in Babil. Voices of moderation appear to be ascendant and many Sadrists are engaging in the political process. Like the other major parties, the Sadrist Trend is fielding several (at least five) separate candidate slates. Many of them are not "fronts," in the true sense of the word, but rather like-minded political entities, such as Al-Halnah and Risalion. Relations between Da'wa and OMS have strengthened over the last year and a coalition between Da'wa and the Sadrists in the new PC is a prospect welcomed by both parties, but one dependent on the election results. The OMS parliamentary group's endorsement of the Free People Trend (Tayar Al-Ahrar) is likely to focus the Sadrist vote on January 31. Another pro-Sadrist slate (Ahalnah) had hoped it would also be endorsed by OMS. No Sadrist candidates have yet alleged threats or intimidation against them. Like Dawa, the Sadrist-affiliated parties all staunchly oppose "federalism," specifically the creation of a region of the south. Unlike Da'wa, these Sadrist entities have not shown an ability -- or inclination -- to reach across the sectarian divide. Interestingly, Ahalnah candidates believe that the Security Agreement is the way to return Iraq to full sovereignty and that the USG wants to see a stable, peaceful and democratic Iraq. Not exactly a view ascribed to Moqtada Al-Sadr.

Independents

¶7. (C) The independents may end up holding the balance of power in a new PC. Babil's elites anticipate that political power will be more diffused in the next PC -- unless Da'wa does spectacularly well. Non-sectarian but not uniformly democratic, the leaders of the major independent slates will not, however,

be a coherent force in the new PC. Former Governor Witwit, a leading independent and very secular candidate, aspires to recapture the governorship, but he would be hard for Da'wa to control. As many as three or four independent slates could find themselves represented on the PC, and one of these could provide a compromise candidate for Governor acceptable to a wide array of non-ISCI parties. These range from one headed by the brother of the assassinated head of provincial police and communists to secular businessmen and Sunni slates. Change is assured -- with a new Governor and half the PC replaced -- but there is little certainty at this point on what it will exactly look like.

HEATH